

Polish presidential election: playoff between two right-wing candidates

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Last weekend's presidential elections in Poland saw the continuation of the trend set during the parliamentary elections held two weeks ago. Right-wing candidates were able to completely dominate the election, while the majority of voters stayed away from the ballot boxes. On October 23 a final ballot between the two presidential candidates with the largest share of the vote will take place—Donald Tusk from the extreme free-market Citizens Platform (PO) and Lech Kaczynski from the conservative law-and order-party Fairness and Justice (PiS).

The first round of the election saw Tusk, who was widely expected to win comfortably, achieve 36.3 percent of the vote, just above that of Kaczynski, who received 33.1 percent. The right-wing populist Andrew Lepper from the Samoobrona (Self Defence) farmers party received 15.5 percent and fourth-place Marek Borowski, the only "left-wing" candidate, obtained 10.2 percent. All other candidates received less than 2 percent of the vote. Voter turnout was extremely low, at just 49.7 percent.

The fact that the two leading candidates both come from the right-wing parties that will form the next coalition government highlights the complete discrediting of the so-called "left" in Poland. In October 2000, when the predecessor organisations to the PiS and PO were in government, the current president, Aleksander Kwasniewski from the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), was able to muster 53.9 percent of the votes in the first round of the presidential election, with a voter turnout figure of 62 percent. Five years later his favoured candidate Borowski was not even able to manage one-fifth of this result.

Borowski belongs to the Polish Social Democracy (SPDL), which split from the governing SLD at the beginning of 2004, but nevertheless continued the same policies as the SLD. In the recent parliamentary elections they failed to get enough votes to enter the Sejm (parliament). The SLD, whose parliamentary vote slumped from 41 percent to 11 percent, did not even field a presidential candidate. Its original candidate, former foreign minister Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz, threw in the towel after he was alleged to

have not properly provided his statement of assets as a parliamentarian.

The collapse of the so-called left is a product of their right-wing politics. Just like the official right-wing parties before them, they have been voted out of office due to their destruction of social services and their programme of privatisation and restructuring. At the end of their legislative period and the presidential term of Kwasniewski, 30 percent of all Polish children live in poverty and 12.7 percent on the street! Since 1989, the government has perpetually rotated between the right- and left-wing parties in order to prosecute a programme that has made the country a paradise for big business and hell for the ordinary population.

Over the course of this period, the population has reacted by continually voting out the government party and turning away from the voting booths altogether. After the record low voter turnout for last year's European elections, last fortnight's parliamentary elections saw turnout drop to 59.5 percent. Now for the first time in a presidential election it has fallen below 50 percent. Irrespective of who comes out on top in the presidential run-off election on October 23, one can no longer speak of a democratically legitimate president.

There are no fundamental differences between Donald Tusk and Lech Kaczynski. Both are conservative politicians with roots in the right wing of the Solidarity movement. In 1997, when the Election Action Solidarity (AWS) formed a coalition government with the Freedom Union (UW) under Jerzy Buzek, Tusk (UW) and Kaczynski (AWS) were both parliamentary members in the government. The Buzek government proceeded to cut pensions, dismantle the public health sector and push through extensive privatisations. In summer 2000 the UW was voted out of office, but continued to support the AWS in power. Kaczynski became justice minister.

As this legislative period came to a close, it became obvious that both the AWS and UW had lost any form of support within the population. In response Tusk, together with his conservative party friends, founded the PO while Lech Kaczynski, with his identical twin brother Jaroslaw,

founded the PiS. During the course of the last parliamentary elections both parties declared their readiness to form a coalition.

On foreign policy both candidates strive for closer ties with the United States. Kaczynski recently declared his first foreign trip would be to the US. “It is our most important strategic partner,” he said. For his part, Tusk justified Poland’s unpopular participation in the Iraq war, stating that “the future of Europe and Western civilisation in the next 50 or 100 years can only be secured through a stable transatlantic relationship and partnership with the United States.”

Both candidates praised the incumbent president during a television debate for his work in the Ukraine, where he supported the US-friendly Orange Revolution, thereby cutting across Russian influence in the country. At the start of August, as the diplomatic conflict between Belarus and Poland over the Polish minority in Belarus came to a head, Tusk travelled to Minsk and declared that Kwasniewski was doing little to protect Polish interests.

Once can expect a more aggressive policy towards Russia from both Tusk and Kaczynski. Both candidates have also supported demands for war reparations from Germany. Kaczynski even tabled a bill for €30 billion for the damage done to Warsaw in the Second World War. Tusk, however, is considered to be more European friendly. “Our relationship with Germany is crucial for our status within the EU,” he said during a television debate.

Both the PO and PiS want to press ahead with privatisation, beef up the state apparatus and base their policies on Catholic values. Tusk even called Kaczynski his “political friend” and hesitated to even take part in the presidential election. The election campaign itself consisted of devising emphasis in setting policy and marketing strategies rather than competing political programs.

Kaczynski portrayed himself as a strong proponent of “law and order.” He wants to establish a Polish fourth republic, cleansed of all socialist influences. In addition he is seeking to strengthen the rights of the president in relation to the government via a constitutional amendment and an “ethical code.” The 56-year-old Kaczynski also advocates a severe tightening up of Polish law. “If parliament agrees upon a law to reintroduce the death penalty I would sign it,” he said. “I want to be a strong president.”

In his former role of mayor of Warsaw he had already made clear what he thought of democratic rights: on the basis of flimsy arguments he had forbidden a demonstration of homosexuals in June, while permitting a meeting of neo-Nazis, which he regarded as “normal.” The homosexuals nevertheless met and were then brutally attacked by neo-Nazis. Kaczynski later criticized the police for protecting

those gathered for an illicit demonstration, and speculated on a national conspiracy.

Towards the end of the election campaign Kaczynski increasingly sought to take up social issues in order to distinguish himself from his protagonist. In a television debate he accused Tusk of pursuing “a program for the rich.” He did not want the state to absolve itself from social responsibility, he said. Such statements, however, remain abstract. As a cabinet member under Buzek and as mayor of Warsaw he showed little interest in the social situation of the large majority of the population.

The 48-year-old Tusk rejects any policies based on social reconciliation. He told Polish radio that his party stressed that a coalition government program must avoid the dangerous populist ideas of the Right and Justice party, particularly in the sphere of economics. His party calls for a flat tax of 15 percent—which means nothing less than an enormous handout for the wealthy.

The building up of the state apparatus favoured by Kaczynski corresponds fully to the course proposed by Tusk. As early as 1992 Tusk told the Polish newspaper *Trybuna* that, if necessary, popular resistance to neo-liberal economic policies should be beaten back with rubber truncheons and armed force.

Nevertheless in the election campaign Tusk posed in statesmanlike manner and declared his readiness to compromise. He maintains close links to the German Christian Democratic Union and its leader and Germany’s new chancellor Angela Merkel, who also appeared in his election campaign ad.

The latest developments in Poland make clear that the political elite has shifted further to the right and is preparing new attacks on Poland’s working masses. The working population must develop its own response and confronts the urgent task of developing its own independent political party.



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